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Gordon Best, MPANI

KEEPING YOU INFORMED OF WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE INDUSTRY

You will be aware that the NI Executives Coronavirus roadmap for re-opening is being rolled out at the minute and it's great to see more parts of our economy getting back to normal, or should I say the "new normal."

Most people I talk to, while pleased that we are moving forward, are still cautious and want to take things slowly particularly with the new variants presenting a threat and the fact that most of those under 30 have not yet had the vaccine.

I am pleased to say I have had my second jab with fortunately no side effects. It's certainly true that given the result of our last age profiling of our industry I could say, with a fair degree of confidence, that most of our industry will certainly have their first vaccine and a sizeable number their second.

I know that many of you have introduced in-house regular testing for staff and continue to operate a work from home policy for those staff who can but it is clear that more and more we are starting to get back into the office but with social distancing and good hygiene the order of the day.

Charity Golf Day

I am delighted that we are able to hold our Annual Industry Charity Golf Day this coming June 7th at the Hilton Templepatrick. We have over 20 fourballs booked with the usual shot gun start and plans made for our social distancing dinner and prizegiving.

In addition to that and as a sign of getting back to normal activities we have arranged an Affiliate Members Lunch in September in Belfast as a way of saying thank you to our valued Affiliates for their continuing support, particularly through the pandemic when opportunities for networking through the Association were not possible.

We are also in the process of planning our local member forums for September and early December and no doubt, as illustrated by the registration for our Golf Day, members will be keen to get out and meet face to face.

Blasting Course

Recently we hosted the first class for the Blasting for Non-Blasting Managers Course at our offices at Nutts Corner. It's great to see the positive response coming from right across our industry to this course that, although questioned by some initially, is now recognised by all as improving the knowledge of those responsible for their sites pertaining to all aspects of the blasting process.

I have said on a number of occasions that blasting is the one area that causes greatest risk and concern to neighbours and its clear from feedback from planning application objections that this one area is under greatest scrutiny and is targeted and focused on by those out to stop our industry.

The dates for future courses are:

- May 26 / June 2
- Bemac Training, Crumlin BT29 4SR
- June 9 / 16 / 23 / 30
- Glenavon Hotel, Cookstown BT80 8JQ
- September 6 / 13 / 20 / 27
- Bemac Training, Crumlin BT29 4SR

For more information about the course and booking details visit:
[Blasting_for_Nonblasting_Managers_NI.pdf](#) (mcusercontent.com)

Planning Review

MPANI responded to the Department for Infrastructure's Review of 2011 Planning Act that closed on 16th April. We are working with others in the business community to ensure that the Department takes forward a reform programme before next year's Assembly election. Within the MPANI response to the Review we have called for:

- Establishment of a review mechanism to ensure that environmental conditions on mineral sites are kept up to modern standards.
- Establishment of a local Council shared service for the management and processing of Mineral Planning in NI due to its unique complexity.

Implementation of the recommendations of the Irvine Report on the role of statutory consultees.

Continuing capability and knowledge building through the Environmental Governance Initiative.

Adequate resourcing of the pre-application community engagement process.

Meeting with Minister

The MPANI Chairman, Simon McDowell and Vice Chair, Paul Brogan, and myself recently met online with Infrastructure Minister Nicola Mallon and senior officials on the 27th April. We had provided a detailed briefing paper to her and we covered the issues raised during the 45 minute meeting that included a number of concerns over Procurement, Planning, Water and sewerage infrastructure, Removal of the Red Diesel Rebate in 2022 and delays in delivering infrastructure projects. We have also extended an invitation to her to visit one of our sites.

We congratulated the Minister for securing a 2021 / 22 Structural Roads Maintenance budget of £120 million. This is the highest ever starting level for the incoming financial year. Given that recent years have saw annual outturns in and around £100 to £106 million.

This is very good news for the industry. Unfortunately, the recent contract tenders for 4 of the 8 Asphalt Resurfacing Contracts have been challenged resulting in these areas now having no contracts in place. At our meeting with the Minister, we made clear that as a responsible Trade Association, we cannot and will not get involved in legal cases that involve procurement challenges, particularly as in this case, where we have MPANI Members taking the challenge and other Members are negatively impacted by it.

Our only position at this time, without knowing the reasons for the legal challenges, is to encourage the Department to resolve the dispute as quickly as possible for all concerned as it is not in the public interest to have no operational maintenance contracts in a number of Council areas. As

and when the challenges reach a conclusion, we encouraged the Minister and her Department to look into the primary reasons for the frequent occurrence of such legal challenges to determine if a fundamental review of the approach to the procurement of Term contract work is required. MPANI would commit to constructively engaging with the Department in any such review.

Training News

Other good news on the training front is that MPANI working in partnership with the Institute of Asphalt Technology and CITB (NI) have developed a new NVQ Level 4 Highway Maintenance and Repair Site Supervisors Course. An introduction day will be held on June 16 the first class being held on June 30th and the second class held on August 11th and after that on a monthly basis up to October followed by on site assessments.

I hope that many of you saw and shared on social media the very successful Road Worker Safety campaign ran in partnership with MPANI, DfI and the PSNI, supported by Road to Zero. The online message was viewed by 220,000 people and feedback from our members indicate that these regular safety messages are reducing levels of abuse and violence against road workers and incursions of traffic into road closures.

We recently donated copies of our "Ready Mixed Concrete – Practical Guide for site personnel" to People 1st who deliver the NVQ L4 Construction Site Supervisors Course. All those construction site supervisors attending and completing the Course will receive a copy of the Best Practice Guide.

Hopefully this initiative will strengthen our ongoing campaign and education of clients and customers about the importance of proper ordering, placing and care of concrete by using quality assured suppliers and contractors who are competent in the laying of concrete.

Brexit

Brexit and working with the complexities of the NI Protocol is still very much an issue for our members and our customers, particularly in the farming and agri-food sector. As you know I sit on the NI Business Brexit Working Group and we continue to engage with UKG, EU and the Irish Government on solutions to these complexities.

Indeed, recently NIBBWG Chair, Aodhan Connolly hosted Lord Frost and the Secretary of State on a number of visits to NI Businesses to hear for themselves about the impact of working with the current protocol. We continue to seek Stability, Certainty, Affordability and Simplicity.



MPANI's Gordon Best (right) pictured at the presentation of best practice booklets to Peter Daly of People 1st who deliver the L4 NVQ in Construction Site Supervisor Qualification, and (centre) Barry Neilson, CEO of CITB NI.

Improving Economy

To finish on a positive note I am sure you are all encouraged at the level of economic activity at present and the projections for the immediate future all be it with concerns about what will happen once Government Covid 19 assistance ends.

The recent Ulster Bank PMI reported that the start of the second quarter heralded a significant improvement in local business conditions. Northern Ireland's private sector reported a return to growth in business activity and new orders in April although export orders, as opposed to domestic, posted another sizeable fall. The rebound in business activity, the first rise since September 2020, marked the fastest rate of growth in 33 months. Meanwhile employment increased for the second month running with the pace of job creation hitting a 40-month high.

Richard Ramsay, Chief Economist at Ulster Bank said, "Local firms have benefited from a notable pick-up in demand. But this improvement is occurring alongside significant supply chain disruption. Adapting to the new NI Protocol is one aspect of the increasing cost of doing business. However, it isn't the only source of disruption. Economies around the world have seen a lengthening in suppliers' delivery times due to the

pandemic and worldwide shipping issues such as a shortage of shipping containers.

"Linked to this, Northern Ireland firms once again reported a record rise in input costs stemming from higher prices for raw materials and fuel coupled with increased shipping costs. In turn, companies are also passing these increased costs onto their customers at a record rate. At a sector level, both retail and construction posted record rates of input cost and output price inflation."

Nationally, MPA are reporting the recovery in construction demand for mineral products remained resilient during the first quarter of 2021, despite headwinds from the renewed lockdown restrictions, Brexit and a particularly wet winter affecting construction work.

Demand for primary aggregates and ready-mixed concrete increased 3.4% and 1.6% respectively in the first quarter of the year compared to the previous quarter. By contrast, both asphalt and mortar sales volumes declined over the quarter, down 4.9% and 7.4% respectively. MPA producer members reported strong housing activity and an acceleration in infrastructure work driven by the roads programme and High Speed 2. Finally, may I wish you all continuing health and success and please stay safe through these continuing challenging times.